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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: CONGRESSMAN MEEKS MEETS WITH AFRO-PERUVIANS

¶1. (U) Summary. Congressman Gregory Meeks met with representatives of the Afro-Peruvian community on May 27. The Afro-Peruvians discussed their marginalized role in society, where 90 percent live in poverty and their unique cultural heritage is largely ignored. Congressman Meeks encouraged them to work actively to have their voices heard, and he offered to represent their interests in his meetings with Peruvian leaders. End Summary.

¶2. (U) At a luncheon meeting at the Ambassador's residence, Congressman Gregory Meeks met with five Afro-Peruvian leaders; Oswaldo Bilbao, Carlos Lopez, Jorge Ramirez, and Paulo Colino and Congresswoman Cecilia Tait. Ambassador Struble, Congressman Meeks' Legislative Director Sophia King, EconOff and PolOff (note taker) also participated.

Concerned by Trade Accord  
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¶3. (U) Congressman Meeks started the meeting by asking the Afro-Peruvian representatives what they thought of the proposed Peru Trade Promotion Agreement and to comment on politics in general. The Afro-Peruvian leaders all complained about the "invisibility" of those they represent. When Peruvian politicians speak of social exclusion and racism, they almost always refer to the indigenous populations of the highlands and Amazon and not to coastal Afro-Peruvians, who make up 2 percent of the country's population, the vast majority of whom (over 90 percent participants said) live in poverty.

¶3. (SBU) Oswaldo Bilbao was particularly concerned how Afro-Peruvian farmers, the majority of them small scale, subsistence agriculturalists, would be included in the FTA. He said that without special investments, Afro-Peruvians would be left out. In a similar vein, other participants said that special programs were necessary to create scholarships and other opportunities for Afro-Peruvians. Such programs existed for Peruvians from the Amazon region. Paulo Colino asked how the FTA would enable Afro-Peruvians to recover their lost heritage, complaining that they have been systematically left out of Peruvian history.

No Voice  
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¶4. (SBU) The majority of those present agreed that Afro-Peruvians suffered from a lack of truly national representation that would compel the central government to pursue policies that would allow Afro-Peruvians to catch up to their fellow citizens. Congresswoman Cecilia Tait offered a dissenting view. Saying with a note of irony that she could have used their support in INDEPA, the Executive's special department for indigenous and minority groups. She also remarked that, as an elected official, she could not simply pay attention to the needs of her Afro-Peruvian constituents, but had to serve her entire electorate, warning that advocacy of purely sectoral policies might not work in practice for most politicians. The group noted that Afro-Peruvians had lost ground in the April 9 elections for Congress, since the number of Afro-Peruvian representatives had dropped from three to one.

Ignored  
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¶5. (SBU) When questioned if Afro-Peruvian leaders had approached either of the presidential candidates - Ollanta Humala or Alan Garcia - as a group to press their issues, they said no. Oswaldo Bilbao mentioned that he had produced a 14-point agenda for Afro-Peruvians, but it was clear that none of the other leaders present had bought into his proposal.

Comment: Where to From Here  
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¶6. (U) Afro-Peruvians are one of Peru's most neglected and marginalized ethnic groups. That their leadership remains divided, the participants recognized, limits their possible political influence. Congressman Meeks' visit may have energized the group, at least momentarily. Post will lend its good offices to raise consciousness of Afro-Peruvian issues. End Comment.

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